

This record is a partial extract of the original cable. The full text of the original cable is not available.

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 PANAMA 000914

SIPDIS

STATE FOR WHA/CEN/BRIGHAM

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [PINR](#) [PM](#)

SUBJECT: PRE-ELECTION VIEWS FROM THE FIELD: NEW  
REPRESENTATIVES FOR THE POOREST OF THE POOR--PANAMA'S  
INDIGENOUS

-----  
SUMMARY  
-----

1. (U) EmbOfs recently visited the western Panama reservation (or Comarca) of the Ngobe-Bugl indigenous group as part of our pre-election coverage. The Comarca will elect three new representatives on May 2 to the 78-seat unicameral Legislative Assembly. The new seats could provide some important political clout for this largely forgotten and impoverished people. Continuing lack of social services, horrendous roads, and general malnutrition plague the area and were evident on this trip. Indications point to a likely sweep of all three legislative seats for the main opposition, the center-left Democratic Revolutionary Party (PRD) - Popular Party (PP) alliance. END SUMMARY.

-----  
WHERE WE WENT AND WITH WHOM WE SPOKE  
-----

2. (U) During April 13-15, EmbOfs visited election officials and candidates from three of the major political parties in and around the western Panama reservation (or Comarca) of the Ngobe-Bugl indigenous group. EmbOfs visited communities inside and outside the Comarca in Veraquas and Chiriqui provinces and in two of three Comarca electoral circuits. Meetings (both scheduled and ad-hoc) were held with local Electoral Tribunal officials, candidates, campaign managers, teachers, mayoral candidates, students, and any Panamanian who wanted to share their opinions with EmbOfs.

-----  
THE COMARCA: POLITICAL HISTORY, POLITICAL PLAYER?  
-----

3. (U) At about 6,944 square kilometers (9% of Panama's area), the Comarca Ngobe-Bugl is slightly larger than the state of Delaware. Created in 1997, the Comarca has an estimated population of 120,000, over 95% of whom are from the Ngobe and Bugl indigenous groups. (Note: The national population of the Ngobe-Bugl, including those living outside the comarca, is an estimated 180,000. End note.) The Comarca comprises several hundred small and isolated towns and villages, mostly reachable only on foot, sometimes hours or days from any road, and only a handful have electricity.

4. (U) At its creation in 1997, the Ngobe-Bugl Comarca gained three dedicated seats in the unicameral legislature. Previously, Comarca residents voted as part of larger electoral circuits and their interests received little attention. All the candidates for the three new circuits (12-1, 12-2 and 12-3) are Ngobes. If these new legislators act in concert, by no means an easy assumption in Panama's fractured political culture, they could become a political force by serving as a key swing vote in the legislature. This is especially true given Panama's history of closely divided government. (Note: Current Ngobe-Bugl legislator, Enrique Montezuma (PRD) is from the Comarca and the only Ngobe representative. End note.) For the most part, contacts said that the elections will be relatively fair and clean, but some suggested the potential for isolated cases of fraud in remote villages.

-----  
PROBLEMS ABOUND, NGOBE-BUGLE ARE POOREST OF PANAMA'S POOR  
-----

5. (SBU) The Comarca faces staggering problems. According to the latest United Nations Development Program (UNDP) survey, about 95% of the residents live at the poverty level or below, and about 86% live in extreme poverty. Unemployment, malnutrition, hunger, lack of roads, and isolation plague the entire Comarca. EmbOfs were stunned by the evident malnutrition and lack of physical development among Ngobe children. The isolation further hampers provision of social services - schools, clinics and economic activity in general. Even with a 4WD vehicle, EmbOfs found it challenging to reach those villages served by roads that

locals considered "good." Isolation has a multiplier effect in that it represents lost opportunities in education, health care, and economic activity.

16. (SBU) Many villages have a primary school, but further schooling necessitates hours of travel by foot, or arranging to live far away from family. Children drop out of school at a young age to join their parents in the fields and have children themselves, and the cycle of poverty continues. Culturally, the Ngobe-Bugl confront the dilemma of indigenous people all over the world. They face the tough choice between continuing their difficult life, or accepting modernity and losing more of their culture.

-----  
OMAR TORRIJOS, PRD LEGACY LIVES ON  
-----

17. (SBU) Virtually every person EmbOffs spoke with during this pre-election tour pointed to a strong showing for the center-left opposition alliance of the PRD-PP (Note: The only area that the PRD won in 1999 elections was the indigenous comarcas of Kuna Yala, End note.) Many people fondly recalled current PRD presidential candidate Martin Torrijos, father, former strongman and General Omar Torrijos (1968-1981), as a politician who "helped" with schools, roads, clinics and employment. They are hoping for the same if the PRD-PP alliance wins.

-----  
COMMENT  
-----

18. (SBU) Despite the evident hardships, it is encouraging to see "democracy in action" Most Comarca residents with whom EmbOffs spoke are generally aware of the issues and candidates. With luck, the Comarca might receive some badly needed roads, jobs, social service projects, and increased governmental attention. More attention could increase political power, although the cultural bias against the indigenous communities will remain an impediment to broader influence. If the Ngobe win as a block (probably under the PRD banner), it is possible the Ngobe-Bugl might generate as much political clout as the Kuna tribe in northeast Panama, who have aggressively harnessed their political power to obtain schools, infrastructure, and jobs.

WATT